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Musicians to Perform Sacred African Music Concert on Sept. 14

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Musicians to Perform Sacred African Music Concert on Sept. 14

Quick Facts

- Michael Williams and Michael Spiro will perform a concert Sept. 14 in Byrnes Auditorium.
- Williams will play the mbira; Spiro plays the bata drums.



Michael Williams (left) and Michael Spiro

ROCK HILL, S.C. - When **Michael Williams**, professor of music at Winthrop University, teamed up with fellow percussionist **Michael Spiro** for a CD recording, they let the African and Cuban music take the lead.

Their music, called **BataMbira**, will be showcased during a Sept. 14 concert at 7:30 p.m. at **Byrnes Auditorium** at Winthrop, with performances from six master musicians from Cuba, San Francisco, Montreal and the Carolinas. "BataMbira" has been featured on National Public Radio's "All Songs Considered" and "Afropop Worldwide" and Voice of America's "Music Time in Africa."

Williams plays the **mbira**, an instrument with African roots in Zimbabwe often used as a spiritual medium to contact ancestors. The mbira, nicknamed the thumb piano, has 22-28 metal keys attached to a wooden soundboard and is plucked with the thumb and forefinger.

Spiro, a Grammy-nominated percussionist from San Francisco, plays the **bata drums**, also believed to be a sacred instrument. Hourglass in shape, the bata drums are double-headed. Originally from Nigeria, they were brought to Cuba during the 19th century slave trade.

The two say that playing these instruments can be considered "praying with hands."

Spiro, who had given master classes at Winthrop, heard Williams play the mbira and pushed for a collaboration of their music from Cuba and Zimbabwe. The move set in motion a spiritual journey that touched both men.

"It began to feel as if the tunes were finding me as much as I was finding them," Williams said. "This was a lesson in synchronicity, and I was learning the value of stepping back and letting these ancient songs find each other. There was a bit of magic unfolding in the process."

The two feel there are African ancestors "walking" in their paths, fulfilling their destiny. The men have been told that typically Americans aren't supposed to play and sing as well as they do unless there is an African in their path. So, to this day, Williams and Spiro regard each other as twins.

An additional honor for the two will take place Nov. 3 when Williams and Spiro perform their sacred music at the 2007 Percussive Arts Society International Convention in Columbus, Ohio.

Also performing during the Sept. 14 concert are Jesus Diaz, percussion/vocals; Sylvain Leroux, flute; Colin Douglas, bata/vocals; and Adam Snow, mbira/vocals.

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